

A SERMON FROM ST STEPHEN'S

CHILD, REMEMBER

A sermon preached the 25th of September 2016 at St Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, CA, by the Rev'd Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., Rector. Based on lessons appointed, Psalm 146 and Luke 16: 19 – 31.

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just.

— Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act III, Scene IV

Remember that teacher who did something for you which you resisted initially? The one who knew better than you did what was good for you and changed the whole course of your life? Jesus is such a teacher. He loved his students enough to teach them hard lessons to save them from trouble.

Samuel Johnson said of death, “All of life is one long effort not to think about it.” If it's true with respect to death, it's true with respect to hell. Jesus talks about hell often, more often than we'd like actually. It would be jejune to think we can be his disciples, his students, and avoid the subject.

In the Sermon on the Mount, which most would consider the high water mark of Jesus' teaching, he said: “You've heard it said to people long ago, ‘Do not murder. Anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you anyone who's angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.” Jesus *ups* the ante! It isn't just Hitler or Al Qaeda and some terribly heinous acts that will be the subject of judgment, the kinds of things that we are pretty comfortable in saying we're not guilty of. It's the stuff that we all fail with respect to. “Anyone who's angry with his brother. Anyone who says to his brother ‘you idiot’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. Anyone who says ‘you fool’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”

What to make of God's judgment? There are a lot of misconceptions. The *Inferno* of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the medieval vision of torture chambers, has, at least in our reception of it, so misshaped our imagination that the wrath of God is perceived as an extrapolation of human anger. This is a distortion. God's wrath against

sin is not human anger writ large. We tend to blow up at this and that. It's a profound and terrible mistake to think God has temper tantrums the way you and I do. We're prone to anger that is directed at the wrong people at the wrong time in the wrong proportion. God doesn't have that problem.

The scriptures depict God as furious with people who live in luxury and do nothing to feed the hungry outside their gates. And it isn't just the well-heeled who catch hell. Jesus lets the Pharisees have it for their sanctimony and hypocrisy. Luke's next chapter [17] begins with him saying that if someone were to cause a little one harm he'd be better off dead. And so on.

If this sounds like a lot of negativity to you, if you don't like it, then consider the counterfactual: Do you want to believe in a God who, at the slaughter of innocents, *isn't* angry? Do you want to believe in a God who, at the indifference of the wealthy to the hungry lying at their gate, *doesn't* bat an eye? No, you don't. Just so, you and your church care for the hungry.

The Most High doesn't sweep human cruelty and indifference under a rug. God is as emotionally intelligent as we are only more so. God's anger, depicted throughout scripture and exhibited in Jesus's life, is anger that goes its own way in God's own private council who alone tries the hearts and minds of men and women.

God's anger is *patient*. Scripture emphasizes that, unlike your anger or mine which can flare up at a moment's notice, God's anger is always slow. “The Lord passed in front of Moses, proclaiming his name. The Lord is a com-

passionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to the thousands.” [Exodus 33]

God’s wrath [*wroth*, if you’re British] is patient and merciful. The Book of Proverbs tells us, “a fool gives full vent to his wrath but a wise man keeps himself under control.” It assumes without argument that God is not a fool. We read in Habakkuk [3. 2]:

*O Lord, I have heard the report of you,
and your work, O Lord, do I fear.
In the midst of the years revive it;
in the midst of the years make it known;
in wrath remember mercy.*

In wrath God remembers mercy. Even whilst angry, God is loving. This is a paradox.

So God’s wrath or anger is not to be confused with human anger. When King David [see 2 Samuel 24] made the mistake of having a census that was really part of a universal conscription — he was going to create a standing army, and this was against God’s will, it showed a lack of faith — David sinned in a big way. Everyone knew this was wrong, even those commissioned to do the census were offended by it. The prophet Gad comes to David and says, “God is furious about this and here’s the judgment. Either you’re going to have three years of famine or three months in which you’re going to be fleeing from your enemies on the battlefield or three days of plague. Which shall it be?”

Which would you pick? Three years of famine. An act of God. Three months of fleeing from your enemies, submitting yourself to the wrath of man. Three days of plague. Another act of God. David couldn’t decide whether to go with door number one or door number three, but he knew *fer sher* he didn’t want door number two! He said, “I am in deep distress. Let us fall into the hands of the Lord for his mercy is great, but do not let me fall into the hands of men.”

Scripture consistently speaks this way when it speaks of God’s wrath. In Ezekiel, “As surely as I live declares the Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they would turn from their ways and live.”

Turn. I love the way Jesus tells this story. Abraham

calls the rich man *child*. He doesn’t say you *bastard*. There is a recognition of the dignity of a human being.

Sandy Muir is a beloved friend of mine now of blessed memory. He died in February of 2015. William K. Muir graduated from Yale in 1954. That summer, a month before he was to enter the Army, he contracted polio which left him a paraplegic. He took his J. D. at the University of Michigan Law School and returned to Yale to earn his Ph. D. in Political Science. He then came to Berkeley and taught at Cal for over thirty years.

We became friends in 2003 in Michigan. Sandy and his wife Paulette had a summer home in Harbor Springs. For eight years, I was a vicar there at St John’s Episcopal Church, a ‘chapel of ease’. Sandy was brilliant, and the most indomitably cheerful person I’ve ever known.

Every Saturday at 7:30 we would meet for breakfast at Mary Ellen’s Café. When he learned I had been a switchboard operator in college, Sandy told me how, when he was a young scholar at Berkeley, a senior professor told him a story about Joseph Strauss, the businessman who convinced people that a bridge spanning the straits of the Golden Gate could be built.

Strauss, who saw to it that Charles Ellis never got the credit he deserved for building that bridge, was a hot-tempered man. He called the university switchboard at Cal and asked the operator to connect him to someone. It took longer than he expected and he snapped at her to get with it. She thanked him for his patience. He yelled, “Go to hell!” and slammed the phone!

Within the hour, Cal’s president called Strauss. “Did you just tell a switchboard operator to go to hell?”

“I did.”

“You’re going to have to call her back to apologize.”

Strauss telephoned the switchboard, snarling. “Is this the woman I told to go to hell?”

“Yes,” she said, nervously. “It is I.”

“I’m calling ya back to say *ya doesn’t have to go there anymore!*” And he hung up!

The wrath of God isn’t like that. As for hell? Ya doesn’t have to go there! *Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*St Stephen’s Church welcomes you to worship with us at 3 Bayview Avenue, Belvedere, CA,
Sunday mornings at 8 or 10 o’clock. For more information about our life and mission
please email us at office@ststephenschurch.org, call us at 415-435-4501,
or visit us at www.ststephenschurch.org.*